

Providence Athenaeum
251 Benefit Street
Providence
Providence County
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-156

HABS
RI,
4-PROV,
59-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia 6, Pennsylvania

PROVIDENCE ATHENAEUM

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Address: 251 Benefit Street, Providence, Providence
County, Rhode Island

Present Owner
and Occupant: Providence Athenaeum

Present Use: Library

Brief Statement
of Significance: This building, which has housed the Providence Athenaeum since its completion in 1838, was designed by William Strickland. Agnes Addison Gilchrist, William Strickland, Architect and Engineer, 1788-1854 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950) says, "The Athenaeum is an excellent example of Greek Revival at its best. It is simple, well-proportioned, of excellent construction. Utility was not sacrificed for appearance. The classic features were used with restraint; the central axis in the length of the building, the gable roof, and the recessed portico with the two Doric columns."

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: Providence Athenaeum.
2. Date of erection: Plans dated November 1836. Cornerstone laid April 4, 1837. Dedicated July 11, 1838.
3. Architect, builder, suppliers, etc.: William Strickland. Agnes Addison Gilchrist, William Strickland, Architect and Engineer, 1788-1854 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950), lists the following: "Nathaniel Potter provided the granite for the front section from his quarry at Quincy, Massachusetts. The granite for the other walls came from the quarry of Amasa Sweet at Johnston, Rhode Island. The stonemason was Samuel B. Durfee of Providence. The carpenter was Ebenezer Carpenter."
4. Original plans, construction, etc.: Drawings preserved at the Athenaeum include original plans by Strickland, and plans for the later alterations and additions. Strickland's drawings indicate that his plans were carried out with one major change; the plans call for a building

48' x 98', but the building as completed was 48' x 78' to bring the cost within the allowed budget.

5. Notes on alterations and additions: Interior alterations: 1868--James C. Bucklin, architect, 1894, 1898, 1906; the basic divisions of the ground floor are the same, but the original narrow stairway to the main floor was replaced by the present larger central stairway; on the main floor, the present large reading room was originally divided into three rooms, and the skylight is a later addition. A wing was added to the southeast corner of the building in 1914 from plans by Norman Morrison Isham, architect, dated 1913. The exterior preserves the original appearance.
 6. Sources of information: Agnes Addison Gilchrist, William Strickland, Architect and Engineer, 1788-1854 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950), pp. 11-12, 36, 92-94, Pl. 33.
Old Providence, A Collection of Facts and Traditions Relating to Various Buildings and Sites of Historic Interest in Providence, (Providence, Rhode Island: The Merchants National Bank of Providence, 1918).
The Providence Athenaeum, a Brief History, 1753-1939 (Providence: privately printed).
- B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure: The present Providence Athenaeum was chartered in 1836, the union of the Providence Library Company which was started in 1753, and an earlier Providence Athenaeum founded in 1831. The Providence Library Company, the first public library in Providence, had a collection of several hundred volumes purchased in England that was destroyed by fire in 1758. The Athenaeum owns the copy of James Gibbs Book of Architecture that belonged to Joseph Brown, designer of the First Baptist Meeting House in Providence, and later to Caleb Ormsbee, Providence architect.

Prepared by Osmund R. Overby, Architect
National Park Service
and Antoinette F. Downing
for the Providence Preservation Society
August 1961.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: This building, designed by William Strickland, is an excellent example of the Greek Revival.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: 48' (front) x 78' main block, one-story high with balcony, and elevated basement on the sides. Two-story wing at southeast corner.
2. Foundations and wall construction: Regular ashlar granite.
3. Porches: Shallow Greek Revival entrance porch on west end, distyle inantis with two Greek Doric columns of granite.
4. Chimneys: Small brick chimneys at the front and the rear.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doors: Single entrance with two-leaf doors, each a single panel door. Unrelieved door opening.
 - b. Windows: Large double hung windows-- twelve light over twelve light on the main floor. Similar windows eight over eight light on basement.
7. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: Shallow pitched, gable roof with a range of sky lights in center, a later addition. Covered with built-up roofing and gravel.
 - b. Cornice: Very plain molded horizontal and raking cornices--stone on the west front and wood on the sides and rear.

C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Floor plans: Main floor: Large open room with book galleries on both sides, vestibule and two small rooms at the front, and second floor room over the front entrance. Reading room and book stacks on ground floor.

2. Stairways: Plain, open string stairs with simple iron railings to gallery-level stacks. Later stairway to basement-level reading room from the center of the main level: closed string, straight run stair with heavy balustrade with molded handrail, and turned balusters and newel.
3. Flooring: Board flooring in random widths, about 4" to 6".
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Walls throughout are lined with wooden book shelves. Ceilings are plaster. First floor ceiling has a large skylight in the center and is divided into rectangular areas by strips of wood.
5. Doorways and doors: Panel doors with two tall vertical panels, recessed twice. Doorways with double molded architraves.
6. Hardware: Apparently original; doors on butt hinges and have round brass knobs.
7. Lighting: Modern electric lighting.
8. Heating: Original hot air system shown on the original drawings by Strickland; now modern central heating system.

D. Site

1. General setting and orientation: Faces west at the southeast corner of Benefit and College Streets.
2. Enclosures: Simple iron fence on north side. Elaborate Greek Revival cast iron fence at west (front) side. Fountain, gift of Mrs. Anna Richmond, placed in front of the building in 1873.
3. Walks: Brick main sidewalks, asphalt secondary ones. Granite steps lead from the street in two flights--three steps and nine steps--to a flight of ten steps at the entrance porch.

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